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Plant City Residents Rate Answers About
Coronet Mess

Published: Aug 25, 2003

The people who live around Coronet Industries are furious. They fear pollution from the phosphate processing plant or nearby landfills is affecting their health. They report an unusual number of cancers and other afflictions in their neighborhoods.

About 700 people packed a middle school gym last week to express their frustration and anxiety to public officials.

Health tests are under way, but, as the Tribune's Deborah Alberto reports, recent tests found potentially harmful substances in the wells of at least 10 families who live near Coronet.

Anecdotal reports about cancer - an unfortunately common disease - don't prove anything. More research is required to determine if there are an inordinate number of cancers or other illnesses and if they are linked to the plant or to the abandoned landfills.

But this much is clear. The residents were badly served by a regulatory system that did not adequately control or monitor what was going on at the plant.

State and local regulators, to be fair, did not ignore problems at the plant, which has been subject to a number of orders to clean up operations. Still, residents complain that oversight did little to abate pollution.

Neighbors recall seeing a powdery substance falling from the air in the middle of the night when the plant was operating. They remember having to drink smelly water.

Yet it does not appear that officials were much concerned about the potential health threat to the residents of the working-class neighborhoods.

They cited the plant, but regulators never notified residents about the plant's numerous environmental problems, including leaky storage tanks, foul air emissions and hydrofluoric acid spills that resulted in the discharge of arsenic and other toxins into English Creek. Plant City officials were also kept in the dark.

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Only after a joint investigation by The Tampa Tribune and WFLA, News Channel 8 revealed Coronet's troubled environmental history and residents' reports of illnesses did state and county officials react with resolve. The Hillsborough County Health Department is now undertaking a comprehensive health study.

And law enforcement officials are investigating claims by former Coronet employees that their bosses ordered them to dump toxic waste to mislead regulators.

The Plant City Commission has delayed a decision on whether to approve a huge new development near the plant.

The scientific studies should determine if the plant or the landfills are causing health problems. The law enforcement investigation may reveal whether laws were broken.

But the scrutiny should not be confined to pollution. State and local officials should review their own policies to find out why citizens who counted on them to protect their welfare were left vulnerable for so long.

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